

PSYCHOLOGICALLY SPEAKING

**GOVERNMENT SOCIAL POLICY AFFECTING ABORIGINAL
PEOPLE IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA.**

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2. SOCIAL POLICY

2.1 INTRODUCTION

There's an old joke from Aboriginal communities about Government social policies, which centres on an old Aboriginal man sharing his opinions of Governments with a young group of children.

The old man looks at the kids and says "You know these Governments are really good at making policies for us 'fellas. First there was assimilation, then there was self-determination, and now there is reconciliation. Still, it hasn't made any difference to me except now I have a pretty bloody good vocabulary".

He had it pretty right in terms of the effects of Government social policy on Aboriginal people. There were numerous difficulties related to the access of community services, such as the remoteness of some Aboriginal communities, poverty, the cultural mismatch of services, language barriers and inappropriate communication methods, inability to communicate (self-esteem/inferiority), illiteracy, control of information by authorities, and the disempowerment which evolved from the lack of access to money and power.

The policies which will be outlined in this section of the manual will include:

1. Control and Protectionism
2. Assimilation and Integration, and
3. Self-determination and Self-Management.

The policy transition from protection to assimilation to self-determination, entailed not only shifts in intracultural power but a broadening of the range of individuals identified as Aboriginal. The development of a policy of "self-determination" aided in the oppressive restrictions being lifted and attitudes within the White Australian population finally began to change (Hunter, 1993). These changes will be addressed in the section to follow.

2.2 THE POLICY OF CONTROL & PROTECTIONISM (1788 - 1930)

In practical terms, the Protectionist Act gave State governments power to control all aspects of Aboriginal peoples lives from their sexual behaviour, to employment, education, social restrictions and cultural denial. The Chief Protector was able to move Aboriginal people from town to town, institutionalise them in reserves, and place 'uncontrollable' Aboriginals in gaol indefinitely (Markus, 1990). The result was the removal of Aboriginal people from ancestral lands, the placement of unrelated people in missions and reserves, leading to familial, social and cultural disruption, the emotional effects of which can never be truly measured. A permit was also required from the Chief Protector before being able to enter into employment and a minimum wage was set. Employers were exempt from paying this wage if they fed employees dependants which the majority of employees

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claimed was the case. Those who were paid a wage did not actually receive this money to spend as they pleased as it was often kept in the care of the Protector. A request had to be made by the individual to spend their earned money on personal items. Access to mainstream education was mostly denied and Aboriginal children relied on Missionaries and stations wives to teach them to read and write (Mullard, 1974)

The most devastating policy under the Protectionist Act was that State Government bodies were sanctioned and given the power to remove Aboriginal children from their families. Children of lighter skin colour were removed from their full-blood parents in an attempt to take them from their 'uncivilised' backgrounds and give them a chance to benefit from White socialisation (Reid & Trompf, 1991). These children became the 'property' of the State (ie. Wards of the State) and were placed with white families or Christian missions to be educated in the 'White-mans way'. In 1915 the NSW Protectionist Act was amended and blueprinted in most States which gave governments far more reaching powers in their determination of children deemed to be in need of care and protection. Governments were able to make personal judgements about a child's physical and moral endangerment, which was racially motivated (see old Native Welfare archival files for examples). For example, during a reading of an archival file, I noticed that some children who were the product of tribal marriages were considered to be illegitimate or in moral danger and thus were removed from their family of origin.

2.3 POLICY OF ASSIMILATION & INTEGRATION (1934 to 1972)

As previously reported, the Royal Commission of 1934 marked the commencement of Federal Government involvement in Aboriginal social policy and led to support for assimilation as the first national policy. The aim of integration of Aboriginals into the general community was to enable them to *"acquire the same standards of living as other Australians"* (Brock, 1993: pp. 14). The policy which aimed to eradicate full-blood Aboriginals was described by Rowley (1972) as a systematic form of cultural genocide which continued until the early 1970s. For Aboriginal people the change in policy represented the relaxation of the freedom of movement controls placed on them by the protectionist policies - they were able to socialise with whom ever they pleased, acquire alcohol, and attend social functions as suited. However, a change of this manner was destined to result in huge teething problems for a race of people who had spent the past one hundred and forty years being isolated from mainstream society and controlled in every aspect of their lives.

During this era, Aboriginal people began to establish themselves on the fringes of towns. Fringe dweller communities seemed to emerge as a result of the (a) relaxing of the protectionist viewpoint and removal of the "Big Brother" role of White Australians; (b) limited resources and skilling available for Aboriginal people; (c) the introduction of alcohol; (d) the loss of cultural and family ties and particularly traditional practices, and (e) refused access or reluctance to chance involvement in mainstream society (collation of information from various text and

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personal communications with fringe dwelling communities within the Goldfields District). Assimilation was supposed to enable access to mainstream facilities for Aboriginal people but the racism that existed towards the 'new citizens' resulted in stalling of this aspect of assimilation for some two decades (Rowley, 1970). The loosening of the role of the Department of Native Affairs, although a positive step, was a difficult one for many Aboriginal people who become used to dealing with the Department's all-embracing role which had created a dependency making it difficult for Aboriginal people to exist independently.

The notion of Aboriginal people being able to apply for Citizenship rights also created much fragmentation and feuding between tribes and relatives. The "Application for Citizenship" was basically a list of questions which assessed the person's ability to "live according to White standards" and whether or not they "consorted with natives". Many people were torn between wanting a better life for themselves and their children by claiming Citizenship, and having to give up their birth heritage and ways of living. Citizenship resulted in many ties being broken within the Aboriginal community, feuds between 'citizens' and 'natives', and shame and humiliation of family members trying to live the "white way" became commonplace. Citizenship led to a great number of the disputes between large family groups which are evident today (E.Walker, Personal Communications, 1994, 1995).

The Education reforms of the 1950's, and the introduction of compulsory education in mainstream schools also created difficulties for many children. The desire to assimilate 'half-caste' children into mainstream by giving them a Western-based education, meant very little to these children who were trying to come to grips with their own cultural identity and did not see its purpose as a result of their child-rearing and daily practices. Many elders could not see the benefit of sending children to schools as many would still come home unable to read or write. Teaching spelling, reading and writing also had no significance in the traditional sense as it did not allow for children to learn about cultural heritage which had been denied since colonisation. Many elders resisted schooling for the younger children as they did not see any problem with occasionally missing a day or two (Personal Communications, 1994: Coonana Community Women).

The children themselves also experienced problems in feeling comfortable in a rule-and-routine dominated environment which was predominately populated with White children. Aboriginal children are not traditionally socialised or prepared for schooling. Aboriginal children were often teased by other as being "different" and the racial attitudes of some parents reinforced these views and prejudices.

Assimilation also created problems in the area of justice. Relations with the Police were fuelled with conflict between traditional Aboriginal versus White Australian interpretations of the Law. There appeared to be a direct clash with Aboriginal ways of dealing with disputes often resulting in imprisonment for Aboriginal people who were carrying out traditional 'pay back' and on occasions it also led to double punishment for Aboriginal offenders through White and Aboriginal Law. One reaction to this 'interference' in the Law was anger, hostility and violation towards the police and other law enforcement agencies (ie.Courts). For their part

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the Police viewed this anger defensively which helped to lay the foundation for future negative relations between the justice system and Aboriginal people.

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2.4 THE POLICY OF SELF-DETERMINATION & SELF-MANAGEMENT (1972 - present)

The introduction of across-the-board social reforms for Aboriginal people by the Whitlam Government in 1972, was a turning point for the treatment of Aboriginal people in Australia. These social reforms were really about opening up access and pouring money into Aboriginal Affairs which had little to no infrastructure or real direction as to where changes needed to be made or would be most effective. The result was the emergence of a stereotype about Aboriginal people being able to claim money for any need from Government agencies, simply on account of the fact that they were Aboriginal. However, the financial figures of Aboriginal spending on social needs indicated that their spending represented about an eighth of the spending on non-Aboriginal social needs but this was rarely considered (Markus, 1994).

The question which began to circulate amongst Government Departments during the change of social policy from that of assimilation to self-determination was “Have the social reform policies of this era really led to equality for Aboriginal people, or has it simply allowed for an increased access to essential services and resources whilst continuing to deny the need for economic and social justice?” The evidence from the Royal commissions and the establishment of specialist Aboriginal-oriented services (eg. AMS and the Aboriginal Legal Service - ALS) would suggest that social policy has not advanced Aboriginal people any further than they were during the era of protectionism. As a significant part of the total population, the statistics indicate that Aboriginal communities are the most disadvantaged group on every social scale. Educationally, only 85% of Aboriginal children attend school regularly, compared to almost 100% nationally; Aboriginal unemployment is four times the national average; mortality is three times the national average for adults and two times for infants, and incarceration is 27 times more likely if you are Aboriginal than non-Aboriginal (statistics from Social Justice for Indigenous Australians, 1991-1992).

The social reform of the 1950's was supposed to recognise Aboriginal rights but only resulted in the transference of dependency from pastoralists and landowners to the social services which now account for a third of Aboriginal incomes (statistics from Social Justice for Indigenous Australians, 1991-1992). The need for self-determination was finally recognised in 1972 and it has recently been given serious consideration through the Federal Labour Governments' policy of reconciliation which marked a new shift away from the paternalism, to Aboriginal policies being created by and run by Aboriginal people and communities. The creation of ATSIC was the first time in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders were given the opportunity to determine how best to fund their own communities. However, the in-fighting created by citizenship, and the displacement of Aboriginal people through assimilation has resulted in funding decisions being made by many Aboriginal groups which are politically motivated rather than needs directed. This has been the greatest criticism of ATSIC by Aboriginal groups which is currently being addressed.

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Educationally, Aboriginal children seemed to have remained somewhat lost in a system created for middle class children by middle class White educators. Racism in the playground and subliminally in the methods of teaching will remain regardless of the Education Department's recent efforts to introduce Aboriginal cultural education in national school curriculum. There has emerged from these issues schools which specifically cater for Aboriginal children, such as the Christian Aboriginal Parent Directed Schools in the country (commonly referred to as CAPS and there are three schools located in the Goldfields District - namely Coolgardie, Kurrawang and Esperance), Clontarf, Wandalgu, and various others in Perth. These schools usually do not teach past Year 10 level. They are managed and the curriculum is analysed by Aboriginal parents. The children are encouraged towards obtaining 'life skills' rather than a curriculum based education with which they can complete in the mainstream (Personal Communications, 1994-5: Kurrawang Community: Kalgoorlie). In addition, there has been the introduction of AEWs who assist teachers in mainstream education in their working with Aboriginal youth. Whilst the introduction of specific schools and AEWs has in some cases increased the employability of Aboriginal people there remains a high level of unemployment and 'life skills' are yet to be recognised as credible for some employment positions.

Similarly, the creation of the AMS and ALS has resulted in services which are limited in their funding and service provision, and which do not adequately deal with the racism just by their existence. AMS is funded to deal with a range of medical issues for Aboriginal people but there are some health problems which they cannot deal with due to financial constraints and as a result Aboriginal people are resolved to attend mainstream hospitals. This can sometime cause problems as some Aboriginal people and communities (particularly remote communities) have a fear of the unknown when confronted with the option of using "white" mans medicine (Personal Communications, M. Juniper, 1996). The ALS also has problems trying to rationalise White man's punishments of Aboriginal people. In many Aboriginal groups there is "Black" law to deal with criminal activities among themselves but they are also subjected to "White" law which at times punishes those who enforce the "Black" law as well as the original perpetrator. The ALS and Ministry of Justice also have issues to deal with in relation to Aboriginal deaths in custody. Many Aboriginal people fear that the imprisonment of family members will result in their dying whilst incarcerated (Personal Communicaitons, 1995, 1996: Family & Children's Services Aboriginal Field Officer staff - Kalgoorlie, Geraldton & Meekatharra).

In sum, the question currently being as is: "Are the targeted services of today helping Aboriginal people to attain equality?" The answer is not a clear one. On the one hand the basic philosophy behind targeted services puts into practice the concept of self-determination. On the other hand, it seems to contribute to segregation of services for Aboriginal and White Australians as per protectionist policy days. There is no easy solution to these issues and the past cannot and should not be eradicated from history rather utilised as a learning tool to avoid further separatism and racism within multi-cultural Australian society.

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